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Convoy System in the Soviet Merchant Fleet

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Formation of Merchant Vess. & Convoys

1. During World War II the USSR put into use a convoy system for merchant ships cruising in open waters of the Black Sea, the Baltic Sea and the Barents Sea. The merchant ships joined together in large "caravans" and the voyages were made under the guard of military vessels, usually destroyers and torpedo-boat destroyers.
2. [redacted] about 28 Aug 41, the people and property of the town of Tallinn were being evacuated to Leningrad. About 80 vessels of varying tonnage of the merchant fleet were loaded in Tallinn and formed into a convoy. Several cutters, of the "Morskoi Okhotnik" ("MO") class, and four torpedo-boat destroyers were attached to the convoy. The average speed of the convoy was about eight-nine knots an hour. The torpedo-boat destroyers were faster and continually got out ahead of the convoy. Out in the open sea the convoy was exposed to attack by German submarines and planes, mostly torpedo planes. The Soviet naval vessels were unable to defend the convoy and as a result of the attack a large part of the convoy was sunk and only a few vessels made it to Leningrad. Baltic Sea sailors dubbed this episode "St Bartholomew's Massacre".
3. The following basic rules are followed in forming convoys:
 - (a) Among the merchant vessels of the convoy a "leader" or "head" is appointed;
 - (b) All merchant vessels must follow the course of the "lead" ship;
 - (c) In case the "lead" ship is taken out of action, the ship following it must take its place;
 - (d) The number of escorting naval vessels depends on the size and purpose of the convoy;

25X1

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SECRET/SECURITY INFORMATION

- 2 -

- (e) The escort ships stay in front, behind to the left and to the right of the convoy;
- (f) If a ship in the convoy is taken out of action, the other ships must continue and not stop for the lost ship;
- (g) The convoy speed is that of the slowest ship in the convoy.

Usually convoys are made up of ships which have approximately the same speed and sea-going qualities.

Escort Vessels

- 4. In the first period of World War II, the Soviet navy had no special convoy ships. Torpedo-boat destroyers, destroyers, and even gun-boats and cutters of the "MO"-type were used as escort ships. There was no convoy system worked out.
- 5. During the course of the war, the Soviet Navy acquired special escort vessels, "corvettes and frigates". The "corvette" is a comparatively small ship displacing 600-900 tons, with a speed of less than 20 knots but very sea-worthy and maneuverable. The corvettes have great numbers of depth bombs, and all-purpose rapid-fire cannon. The corvettes are provided with special acoustical equipment for chasing submarines. The "frigate" is a reinforced escort vessel. It displaces 1000-1200 tons and has a speed of up to 22 knots. The "frigate" as well as the "corvette" is well armed and equipped with ultra-sonic apparatus for seeking submarines.

Use of Aviation for Convoys

- 6. Aviation was not used for the escort and protection of USSR merchant ship convoys. There were instances when Navy sea planes were brought from their base to ward off enemy attack. Usually in such instances, sea planes of the navy air unit attached to the navy command were used.

Instruction on Board Ships

- 7. During peace time, Soviet crews constantly undergo instruction in various alarms or alerts ("trevogi"). Every type of alarm has a time-table or schedule which determines the procedure and place of action for every member of the crew when the alarm is sounded. The schedule for the alarms is either typed or written by hand and hung over the bunk of every crew member. Everyone coming aboard a ship to serve must become familiar with the contents of the alarm schedule and then sign a statement for the captain to that effect. In the future, the new crew member must remember by heart the alarm schedules which concern him according to his function on the ship. The alarm schedules are as follows:

(a) Water Alarm (vodyanaya trevoga)

- (1) The water alarm is sounded when a large quantity of water enters the ship as a result of a shell hole or some other reason.
- (2) Crew members who are on duty when the alarm is sounded remain on duty.
- (3) The remaining members of the crew go to their assigned posts to help try and save the ship. A part of the crew led by the first mate is occupied with trying to patch the shell hole.
- (4) The radio man must be in the radio room to maintain contact with the nearest ships and ports.

(b) Fire Alarm

- (1) The fire alarm is sounded with prolonged buzzers in the crew's quarters and a loud gong when signs of fire (smoke or flame) are discovered on the ship.
- (2) Crew members who are on duty when the alarm is sounded remain in their places.
- (3) The remaining members of the crew go to their assigned places to combat the fire. A part of the crew operates the principal fire-extinguisher (carbon dioxide, foam, steam or water), while another part of the crew operates at the source of the fire with hand fire-extinguishers and other hand fire-fighting equipment. Another part of the crew prepares the lifeboats to be lowered into the water.
- (4) When the fire alarm is sounded all fire valves at the water line are opened. According to the "Sea Register" these valves must be located 20 meters from one another. All pumps are started and the hoses put into action.

(c) Combined Fire and Water Alarm

- (1) The combined water and fire alarm is sounded when large quantities of water enter the vessel at the same time that a fire is discovered.
- (2) Of these crew members on watch, a minimum number remain at their post while the rest proceed to their assigned places to fight the fire and keep the ship afloat.

SECRET/SECURITY INFORMATION

SECRET/SECURITY INFORMATION

- 3 -

It must be noted that at the present time crews of merchant marine ships are not trained for the combined fire and water alert. There was such training carried on during World War II but chiefly on large ships.

(d) Combat Alarm

The combat alarm is not being practiced at the present time by crews of the merchant fleet. During a period of military action the combat alarm is practiced on such merchant ships as are equipped with artillery or machine-guns. Thus, only the fire alarm and the water alarm are practiced on merchant marine vessels at the present time.

In addition to alarms, instruction is carried on in:

- (1) Life-Boat Drill
- (2) "Man Overboard" Drill

(a) Life-Boat Drill

- (1) The purpose of the life-boat drill is to train the crews to lower life-boats rapidly and to operate them in the water.
- (2) All crew members are assigned to definite life-boats, and when it becomes necessary to abandon ship, they must be at the proper boat.
- (3) Each life-boat is assigned two bowmen and crews of rowers.

(b) "Man Overboard" Drill

- (1) This instruction is directed at saving a man who has fallen overboard.
- (2) The mate on duty must give the command "stop" to the machine room as soon as a man falls overboard.
- (3) The sailor on duty must immediately throw a life preserver to the man overboard. If a man falls overboard at night he must be thrown a life preserver with a self-igniting buoy. If it is impossible to get the man up with a line or with a storm ladder, a life-boat must be lowered.
- (4) All members of the crew must know how to throw out a life-preserver.

Landing Operations

8. In the Soviet fleet, the following procedure for preparing and carrying out a landing operation has been set up: The basis of every landing operation must be suddenness of action. The operation begins with scouting of the shore occupied by the enemy. Scouting and preparation of the landing operation must be as secret as possible. Troops and supplies are selected in the port from which the landing team and convoy is to be sent. Various types of vessels must be assembled. Some of the vessels are destined to transport troops and supplies to the landing area, others land the troops and supplies directly on the beach, while a third category protects the convoy during the journey and a fourth carries out support for the actual landing operation. Furthermore, the transports must be loaded quickly and in such a sequence that they can subsequently be unloaded with a minimum expenditure of time and effort during the landing. These operations must be carried on in the port of embarkation with maximum security, and the actual departure of the convoy must attract as little attention as possible with elements of the convoy departing in separate groups under cover of darkness. No one except a small number of the officers must know the rendezvous point for the various parts of the convoy, nor their course to the place of disembarkment. The troop carriers in the convoy are carefully guarded during the journey.
9. When arrival is made at the point of disembarkment, the transports are unloaded into landing boats, which are of two types:
 - (a) First type: vessels for covering the landing. These are fast, small vessels displacing 20 tons. They are equipped with small, rapid-fire cannon, machine-guns and rocket installations. These vessels are supposed to go as close as possible to the shore and direct fire at enemy shore installations.
 - (b) Second type: landing boats. Small 25-ton and larger boats up to 200-ton are used to land the troops on the beach.

After the first wave has been landed and a beachhead seized, large landing vessels of the second echelon are brought in to deliver large quantities of equipment. I know that units of the Caspian Sea flotilla carried on instruction in landing operations but only on a small scale. These practice landings were carried on after 1949 in the region of Kuuli-Mayak (on the eastern shore of the Caspian north of Krasnovodsk.). The main purpose of these exercises was to train Marines for landing operations. Army units were not trained for landing operations on the Caspian Sea.

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25X1

- 4 -

Direction of Navy Maneuvers

10. Beginning in 1949 units of the Caspian Flotilla began carrying out maneuvers, with a majority of the ships being brought to certain areas for this purpose. Up to this time, exercises had been carried out without bringing entire combinations of ships out into the open sea, but had been confined to individual vessels going out for target practice. But beginning in 1949, entire task forces were used, reinforced with modern ships. Maneuvers were carried on during the end of the summer with ships being taken great distances from their base of operations. The flotilla is accompanied on maneuvers by a flotilla staff ship called "Sekstar". This ship was used for a number of years as a staff ship, and the flotilla commander or officer fulfilling his duties and the flotilla staff were aboard this ship. If the commander transfers to another ship, he takes his flag along with him. The Caspian Sea Flotilla's maneuvers were mainly for artillery instruction, raids on shore installations, landing operations, defense against air attack, as well as navigation exercises. During maneuvers, communication between the ships is carried on by radio, flag semaphore, light signals, and colored flags. All commands and directions for ships of the flotilla came from the flagship.

Time and Place of Maneuvers

11. Beginning in 1949, maneuvers of the Caspian Flotilla were carried on annually, usually at the end of summer. Maneuvers were held in the following areas:
- (a) Between the towns Derbent and Makhaachkala (north of Izberbash) - this area is characterized by rocky bottom, difficult shore approaches and heavy storms.
 - (b) In the Kuuli-Mayak region (on the Eastern coast of the Caspian North of Krasnovodsk). This area has a sandy bottom, low banks, shallow waters, a large number of banks and shoals as well as summer air high temperatures, which in July and August attain 46-48 degrees centigrade.

Convoying of Merchant Vessels on the Caspian Sea

12. There was never any use of convoys for merchant vessels nor any exercises in developing a convoy system on the Caspian after World War II and the subject of convoys never even arose. In the first place, at the present time there is no need for the convoying of merchant ships since there is no military activity. Equally unnecessary is the training for convoying actions. The Caspian is a closed basin and the possibility of enemy ships appearing on it in the event of war is very slight. Even the threat of ships from Iran is without substance, for Iranian shores on the Caspian can be easily blocked by ships of the Caspian Flotilla. Among official figures in Baku, [redacted] following statement concerning Iran: "In case of war, Iran can be easily shut up as tight as a [redacted]." In addition, the following circumstance is of extreme importance: Northern Iranians by an overwhelming majority are extremely pro-Communist in their sympathies and look to the Soviet Union more than any other country. Moreover, among Iranians there can be detected an undisguised hatred of European countries. [redacted] Thus, in case of war it would be comparatively easy for Soviet troops to occupy Iran.
13. From 1945-1951 inclusively, the nature of my work afforded me the possibility of knowing everything that went on in the merchant marine on the Caspian Sea, and particularly in such an important area as the petroleum shipping fleet, and [redacted] not even a mention of the possibility of carrying out convoying exercises for Caspian Sea merchant vessels. Anyone making such a proposal would have been called either a fool or a madman.
14. [redacted]
15. Defense of merchant vessels against enemy attack was organized in the following manner: anti-aircraft machine guns and to some extent artillery was installed on all tankers and dry-cargo vessels. All tugs of the "Reydtanker shipping company were equipped with machine gun installations. Sailors from the navy were assigned to man these installations. They did not have to perform general duty, but were only responsible for keeping the machine guns and artillery ready for action and observing the horizon and sky for enemy attack. In addition, large ships were equipped with antimine belts against magnetic mines.
16. Thus, it can be concluded that merchant ships in the Caspian did not go under convoy either during World War II or after, and there was no system of convoying being planned or practiced.

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